



Get great detail  
in your subjects

# Composition

From Snapshots to Great Shots

Second Edition

Learn the best ways  
to compose your  
pictures!

Laurie Excell

Composition:  
From  
Snapshots to  
Great Shots

Laurie Excell



Peachpit  
Press

**Composition: From Snapshots to Great Shots, Second Edition**

by Laurie Excell

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## Dedication

In memory of my dad, Harold Excell, who gave me the gift of photography as a young girl. Thanks, Dad, for opening the door to the wonders of the world through my viewfinder.

## Acknowledgments

This book would not be possible if not for the perseverance of my editorial team at Peachpit: Valerie Witte, Linda Laflamme, Liz Welch, Lisa Brazieal, and all the others behind the scenes who spent tireless hours poring over my misspellings and grammar, who checked and double-checked my facts and who gently prodded me along when I got stuck. Thanks.

My knowledge of photography is the sum of all the photographers I have known and who inspire me—from the students I meet at various workshops to the pros I am fortunate to call my friends. I thank each and every one of you for sharing your passion for photography. I am a better person for each experience.

I would be remiss not to mention at least a couple of photographers who have influenced me with their wisdom and passion for photography. Moose Peterson—my mentor, my friend, my big brother—you saw that spark of interest in me and nurtured me along the way to a full-blown passion for photographing the natural world. You held me to a high standard but none higher than the standard to which you hold yourself. Joe McNally, thank you for your friendship and guidance and for telling me to say yes to the things that scare me the most. The rewards of that simple word far exceed the fear of the unknown.

I want to thank my father for giving me the gift of photography when I was a child and my mother for her unwavering belief in me and the certainty that I can do anything I set my mind to while maintaining an objective view of my work. My loving husband, Frank: I could not sustain the crazy pace without your love and support. You encourage me to go, go when I know that you really want me to stay, stay. I love you, honey.

And lastly, but most importantly, I want to thank each one of you who have purchased this book. It is my hope that you will learn a tip or two (if not much more), that you will enjoy my photography, and that you will go out with what you have learned and make your own beautiful images.

Thank you,  
Laurie

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# Introduction

I was first introduced to the magic of photography as a young girl when my dad handed me one of his Pentax Spotmatic cameras to use during a photography outing. He gave me a few instructions: Set the ISO to match the film you load into the camera, keep the shutter speed to at least 1/60 of a second, and then turn the dial on the lens until the little needle in the viewfinder lines up in the middle. Pretty simple, right? I set about photographing anything and everything in sight and my indulgent father handed me roll after roll of film (slide film).

After waiting a week for the film to be processed, I eagerly opened that first yellow box of slides and placed each slide on my dad's light table, and a budding photographer was born. Looking back on that fateful day, if I had any idea of what constituted a good photograph I would have thrown the images in the trash and picked up some other hobby. But this was my first roll of film. I had aimed my camera at something and in my hands were the results of my efforts. In reality, they were terrible. But they were mine and I didn't know any better.

Of course, my dad couldn't teach me anything. What did he know, after all? He was just a dad. So I confidently loaded up my camera on our next outing, told him I knew what I was doing, and off I went. When I got the next box of slides back, my dad projected them on the screen along with his and my mom's photos. At first I was so excited to see my images on the screen. Then we looked at their images, and I began to see the difference. Even though we had stood side by side, pointing at the same subject, my dad's photographs were well exposed, well composed, and well, just, better than mine. Same for my mom; her images were not only properly exposed but they stirred something within me. I began to wonder what was lacking in my images that theirs had.

Soon I began eavesdropping on conversations about light, exposure, lenses, f-stops, shutter speeds, and so on, and I would try to set my camera to match some of the settings I was hearing. Sometimes it worked, and other times my images were just as bad as ever. I still couldn't figure out why. Luckily, I was so hooked on photography that I persevered. (My dad gave me his camera when he saw that I shared his passion for photography.) I had some success, but mostly I wasn't capturing what I was seeing in my mind's eye when I clicked the shutter. So I kept listening and learning, and yes, I finally asked my dad questions about why his photograph worked and mine didn't. He would explain about depth of field, stop action or blur motion, light and composition, and when I tried what he suggested—it worked! Life lesson number one: My dad was a pretty smart guy.

Over the years, I've improved and developed my own style of photography, which is a nice blend of my dad's technical expertise along with some of my mom's creative flair. Do I still goof up? Oh, yeah. Do I have a lot to learn? Sure, if I want to keep growing in my craft and learning new techniques.

My goal with this book is to help save you from yourself in the beginning. I want to help you to avoid some of the same mistakes I made and help you along the learning curve in a more efficient approach than I took. Sure, you will make mistakes. Embrace them, learn from them, then go out and try again. Don't throw out your first images (I wish I still had mine), keep them, refer back to them, and next time try to avoid repeating the same mistakes. But, most importantly, have fun.

When they say that a picture is worth a thousand words, it's true, but a picture, done well, is so much more. It's a split-second glimpse of a moment that will never come again. It's a window into a world that others may never see unless they can view your photographs. To me, it's a means of maintaining a pictorial memory of my life. I find it amazing that I can completely forget an experience or event and with one glimpse of a photograph I am transported back to that time and place. I can feel the breeze on my face, smell the earthy scent of the soil under my feet, taste the tangy salt in the sea air, conjure up the same emotions I felt when I clicked the shutter. That's pretty powerful stuff.

Photography is about so much more than just composition, and I have tried to cover as much as I could within the confines of one book. *Composition: From Snapshots to Great Shots* is simply a starting place; read the chapters and work through the assignments, and I feel confident that in the end you will be well on your way to making great shots.

And most important of all, have fun and don't forget to keep smiling!

—Laurie



ISO 100 • 1/90 sec. •  
f/11 • 55mm

# 4

# Light

## Light Is the Key Element in Photography

“Light glorifies everything. It transforms and ennobles the most commonplace and ordinary subjects. The object is nothing, light is everything.”

—Leonard Missonne

Without light, there would be no photographs. In fact, the word “photography” means painting with light. Light has quality, quantity, color, and direction, which provide shape, texture, and character to your images. There is a reason that I get up at o’dark thirty while most of the world is still tucked snugly in their warm beds. I drive in the predawn hours to arrive at a location that is cloaked in darkness. I set up my camera in the dark, using a flashlight to make sure my ISO, aperture, and shutter speed are adjusted to my liking as I prepare to make my first image of the day. It’s up to me to choose the best setting to enhance the quality of light.




## Poring Over the Picture

Fog provides a diffusion effect, softening shadows and isolating the subject from the background.

Crashing waves on the Oregon coast had me heading up the dunes at Cape Kiwanda in hopes the morning fog would lift. As the sun burned through the fog and washed over the sandstone cliffs, there was plenty of light. So I was able to keep my ISO at a low setting and still have enough depth of field and a fast enough shutter speed to render the image that I saw in my mind's eye.





As the fog lifts, the sun bathes the sandstone cliffs in a warm light.

Sunlight reflects off the crashing waves, creating a translucent quality to the water.


ISO 200 • 1/200 sec. •  
f/16 • 75mm

## Poring Over the Picture

A visit to Steptoe Butte in the Palouse for sunset gave me much more than I had bargained for as a huge dust storm blew in, obscuring everything in sight and nearly blowing me off the hilltop with gusts that had to be in excess of 70mph. I stuck it out and the payoff was the afternoon light. An enormous dust cloud added a dramatic feel to the scene. Sidelight adds shape and texture to the rolling hills. The light value was well within my camera's exposure range, enabling me to shoot as metered.

With a 360-degree view from the top of Steptoe Butte, I chose a scene that was sidelit to enhance the rolling hills.





● An ISO of 200 enabled me to close my aperture down partway and still have a fast enough shutter speed to handhold as I was afraid the gusting wind would blow over my tripod.

● The approaching dust storm filtered the sunlight, softening the light with a warm glow.

ISO 200 • 1/100 sec. •  
f/8 • 40mm

## The Quality and Quantity of Light

Photography is all about chasing the light. The light you chase has quality and it has quantity. It's the quality and quantity of light that I look for in my photographs. The rich warm tones of sunrise or sunset, the deep blue of twilight, the diffused colors of an overcast day, or the harsh shadows of midday all play a big part in the end result of my images. Understanding light will make you a better photographer.

### Sunrise and Sunset: The Golden Hours

It's anticipation of the quality of light that a beautiful sunrise bestows upon the landscape that pulls me from my warm bed or the approaching sunset that keeps me out shooting during the dinner hour. While the sun is low on the horizon bathing the world in its warm glow, the exposure is well within the range that my sensor needs in order to capture detail in both the shadows and highlights (**Figure 4.1**). If I turn 180 degrees toward the sun, I can photograph into the sun using the bright light as a background for an interesting silhouette (**Figure 4.2**). During the first hours of daylight the light is low, necessitating a tripod for stability or increasing the ISO high enough to achieve a shutter speed fast enough to hold the camera by hand. The choice is yours: greater detail versus greater noise. Knowing your camera's capabilities enables you to make the decision that will produce great shots.

**Figure 4.1**  
Mounting my camera on a tripod allowed me to select an aperture that would yield enough depth of field to render the lighthouse in sharp focus without worrying about the resulting slow shutter speed.

ISO 100 • 1/5 sec. •  
f/8 • 40mm lens





**Figure 4.2** Facing toward the sun, I composed the scene with the sun high in the frame and behind a slender tree to reduce the extreme brightness of shooting into the sun. The long shadows from the trees provide a repeating theme of strong, vertical lines.

ISO 100 • 1/125 sec. • f/22 • 32mm

Quality of light is fleeting. It can last for a season or for a mere moment. Every February in Yosemite National Park, there is a phenomenon that lasts for about two weeks. The conditions have to be just right with no clouds to block the sun and enough water flowing over Horsetail Falls to radiate the setting sun. As the sun drops lower in the sky, the angle of light throws the canyon wall into darkness and light hits the falls, lighting them as if they were on fire (**Figure 4.3**). Talk about quality of light!



**Figure 4.3**

The setting sun casts its light toward Horsetail Falls, illuminating it as if it were on fire. Shooting wide open to keep a faster shutter speed was necessary because I was holding my camera in hand. A minus 1 stop of light darkened the rock wall, enhancing the light on the falls.

---

ISO 100 • 1/180 sec. •  
f/2.8 • 200mm



## Midday

As the sun rises higher in the sky, the *quantity* of light increases, the warmth of first light fades away, and the contrast between shadow and light becomes greater. The brighter light, as the sun moves higher in the sky, means that you can shoot at a faster shutter speed or a smaller aperture without the need to increase your ISO (see Chapter 3, “Exposure Triangle”). As the light gets brighter and the contrast between shadow and light increases, rather than putting my camera away I look to the shadows as backdrops for graphic elements (**Figure 4.4**).

Slot canyons are best photographed at midday when the sun is high in the sky. The light works its way into the canyon through a slim opening bouncing from one red wall to the other, bringing out the colors of the sandstone (**Figure 4.5**).



**Figure 4.4** Midday light, with its hard shadows, turns objects into graphic elements. The sun acts like a point source of light on sunny days, throwing shadows into the mix for added drama. I tend to dial in minus exposure compensation to darken the shadows, making them a deep black that makes a nice contrast against a lit subject. In this shot, minus exposure compensation darkened the shadows, making the column stand out.

ISO 200 • 1/500 sec. • f/8 • 195mm



**Figure 4.5** Midday light, Upper Antelope Canyon, Arizona. With the sun directly overhead, light penetrates into the deep canyon, bouncing off the walls and turning them to a rich, warm color. Dust falls from above into the slot canyons, and the light bounces off the dust, creating “God beams.” For this shot, minus exposure compensation increased the visibility of the shaft of light against the saturated colors of the canyon walls.

ISO 100 • 2.2 sec. • f/22 • 35mm

## Diffused, Overcast Light

Overcast days light the landscape as if there was a giant softbox in the sky. Without shadows and contrast, the light is flat with more detail visible. I like overcast days when photographing mammals, birds, people, flowers, and water for the detail it provides (Figure 4.6). Avoiding the gray sky of an overcast day helps keep the exposure within my camera meter's range and reduces distracting, overly bright areas in the frame.

**Figure 4.6**  
Diffused light brings out the details in mammals' fur. Adding a 1.4X teleconverter to my 600mm lens enabled me to fill the frame with the pronghorn's head. A tripod allowed me to shoot wide open at 1/125 of a second with my ISO set to 200 to avoid noise.

ISO 200 • 1/125 sec. •  
f/6.7 • 850mm



## Twilight

As the day wears on, the sun begins its descent and the shadows grow long once again; it's the light that keeps me out shooting until the last rays of sun are gone. And if I'm lucky and the photo gods cooperate, I'll keep shooting, capturing the blue cast of twilight (Figure 4.7).



**Figure 4.7**  
Twilight at Heceta Head Lighthouse, Oregon. Long after the sun had set, the sea fog began to roll in, making the spot-light more prominent in the dark.

ISO 200 • 1.5 sec. •  
f/2.8 • 195mm

## Changing Light

Light is constantly changing. Different times of the day reveal different elements in a subject. The late afternoon light shines on the Golden Gate Bridge bringing attention to the famous red structure (Figure 4.8). As the sun drops below the horizon, the light disappears from the bridge. The image takes on the cool colors of evening (Figure 4.9). After dark, artificial lights illuminate the Golden Gate Bridge once again, brightening the red of the bridge. A long exposure with moving cars on the bridge adds light streaks, which produces the feeling of motion (Figure 4.10). Carefully planning the timing of your visit to a location, arriving early to scout and set up, and then exercising patience for the best light are key elements to taking your photographs from snapshots to great shots.



**Figure 4.8**

Late afternoon light illuminates the Golden Gate Bridge. With the camera mounted on a tripod, I was able to photograph the same subject at different times of the day into evening, illustrating the difference in light over a few hours' time.

ISO 200 • 1/125 sec. • f/8 • 29mm



**Figure 4.9**

The sun drops below the horizon, plunging the Golden Gate Bridge into darkness.

ISO 200 • 3 sec. • f/8 • 29mm



**Figure 4.10**

Evening approaches and the bridge is lit once again, causing the bright red to stand out against the dark blue sky.

ISO 200 • 30 sec. • f/8 • 29mm



## Direction

Light has three directions in relationship to the camera. The way light falls on your subject determines how you will set your exposure. Front-lit subjects are easy to expose. With no contrast or shadows to deal with, the exposure is well within the range the sensor can handle, so I simply compose and click. Backlight is the opposite of front light, with the light coming from behind the subject and casting it into silhouette. Sidelight adds drama, texture, and shape to your images.

### Front Light

Front light lacks shadows. Consequently, it lacks the texture, shape, or dimension of side-light or backlight. It is, however, a very easy exposure to make. Simply meter your scene and choose the best exposure combination to suit your subject. With a simple click, you have a nice image. Using a fisheye to photograph Emerald Pool in Yellowstone National Park with front light reveals a glimpse into the depth of the pool (Figure 4.11). The lack of shadows reveals the detail in the feathers of a tricolored heron pausing to preen (Figure 4.12). Selecting a wide aperture renders the heron in sharp focus and softens the background, making the subject pop.



**Figure 4.11 (left)**  
Cold air and morning light were key elements in setting the mood for a dramatic image of Emerald Pool.

ISO 100 • 1/500 sec. •  
f/8 • 16mm

**Figure 4.12 (right)**  
Front light on the preening Tricolored Heron shows the details in its feathers.

ISO 100 • 1/1000 sec. •  
f/4 • 600mm

## Backlight

Backlighting (shooting toward the light source) turns your subject into a silhouette. Images that have an interesting shape and form make great subjects when photographing into the sun. The mood of a backlit scene varies depending on how I handle the exposure. Because my camera can't handle the exposure range between shadow and light in a backlit scene, I use the shadows to accentuate the shape of a familiar landmark, the Mittens in Arizona's Monument Valley. By positioning myself so the sun was partially blocked by the formation and closing down my aperture to its smallest setting of f/22, I was able to add a creative starburst to the pinpoint of sunlight (**Figure 4.13**). With the knowledge that I would get a starburst effect from shooting into the sun with a small aperture, I took creative license with my fisheye lens to capture a person for scale (more on scale in Chapter 6), backlit against the North Window in Arches National Park. The scatter of light added creative lens flare (which normally is something I try to avoid) (**Figure 4.14**).

**Figure 4.13**

The rising sun backlights the Mittens in Monument Valley, Arizona.

ISO 100 • 1/10 sec. •  
f/22 • 24mm





**Figure 4.14**  
Shooting directly into the light often produces flare. Although I try to avoid it when possible, I carefully positioned myself to enhance the flare as a creative element.

ISO 100 • 1/500 sec. • f/22 • 16mm fisheye lens

## Sidelight

Sidelight occurs when you are positioned at a right angle to the light source, working the shadows to define shape, form, and texture. The contrast of shadow and light adds a three-dimensional feeling to a two-dimensional image. The simplicity and lack of color in the image of a lighthouse window made for a very high-contrast, graphic look (Figure 4.15).



**Figure 4.15**  
Sidelight adds shape, form, and texture to the lighthouse window.

ISO 100 • 1/2000 sec. • f/5.6 • 200mm



Using sidelight for dramatic effect, I turned my lens on an alligator as it lifted its head out of the water. With only a moment to capture this image before the alligator dropped back into the depths of the lake, I had to act quickly. Knowing how my camera would react to the light, I was able to make a split-second exposure decision and capture the fleeting moment. The water acted as a reflector, bouncing light up into the alligator's face (**Figure 4.16**). The exposure range was too great to capture detail in the shadows, emphasizing the alligator's teeth and eye, which is where I want the viewer's eye to travel within the frame. Just as your lens selection determines what you include (as much as what you exclude) in your frame, the use of shadow and light can further enhance this effect. By excluding part of the alligator's face in shadow, the sense of drama and mystery is increased.

**Figure 4.16**  
Water acts as a natural reflector, bouncing light up into the alligator's face.

ISO 100 • 1/400 sec. •  
f/8 • 390mm



## Exposure Compensation

Exposure compensation gives you creative control of your exposure, enabling you to better use light to produce a look or mood. For example, I rely on my camera's meter to give me the best overall exposure for a given scene. Once I have my base exposure, I then decide on the effect I am trying to capture and override my camera's meter through the use of exposure compensation to achieve it. Dialing the exposure compensation toward the minus settings darkens the image for dramatic effect and avoids blown-out areas within

the frame, whereas dialing toward the plus brightens the scene. Using the histogram (Chapter 2) in your camera enables you to see the overall effect on the exposure value so that you can make any last-minute adjustments in camera.

Window light is a wonderful source of light. In **Figure 4.17** I asked Donald to stand at an angle to the window, controlling the direction the light traveled across his face. Using shadow and light in this way gave Donald's face shape and form that front light would have eliminated. By dialing in minus 1-1/2 exposure compensation, I increased the shadows, which in turn accentuated the character in Donald's face. Donald, a seasoned model, was able to hold very still, which gave me the ability to keep my ISO low to avoid noise and still shoot handheld at 1/30 sec with my lens wide open. With a very shallow depth of field, it was essential that Donald's eye remain in sharp focus. Using my 200mm lens, I composed a tight head and shoulders portrait of Donald.

Donald's face lent itself to the dramatic lighting, whereas the same effect would not flatter a lovely woman. Knowing light and what works best with different subjects enabled me to capture two distinctly different looks. In **Figure 4.18** I used the window light again. But this time the window was a wall of glass that increased the size of the light source and created a much softer, brighter, airy feeling to the portrait of my friend Leila. In this case I dialed in plus 1/2 exposure compensation to add to the bright feel. Wanting to show Leila in her home environment, I used a 90mm focal length to include more of her surroundings.



**Figure 4.17 (left)**  
Using window light and having Donald turn at an angle to the window enhanced the character of his wonderful face.

ISO 100 • 1/30 sec. • f/2.8 • 200mm

**Figure 4.18 (right)**  
Using a larger source of light adds to the bright airy feeling.

ISO 100 • 1/20 sec. • f/2.8 • 90mm

Knowing how my meter will react to a given light situation, I dialed in plus 1 exposure compensation on this kittiwake against a white sky to achieve a high-key look (**Figure 4.19**). Had I gone with the reading my camera gave me, I would have ended up with an image that was darker and moodier with less detail on the bird. Using my camera's Highlight Warning, I could see that the sky was blown out without detail. In this case I chose to accept the blown-out sky to create the effect I was after.

Photographing Roseate Spoonbills in Tampa Bay with front light against the darker mangrove trees caused my Highlight Warnings to blink, warning me of overexposure with no detail on the bird. I dialed in minus 1 exposure compensation to capture the detail in the spoonbill, which in turn darkened the background to nearly black, causing the spoonbill to stand out dramatically (**Figure 4.20**).

**Figure 4.19**

Dialing in plus exposure compensation brightened the sky and gave this Royal Tern image a high-key effect.

ISO 200 • 1/1000 sec. •  
f/5.6 • 380mm



**Figure 4.20**

Dialing in minus 1 exposure compensation gave me a proper exposure of the Roseate Spoonbill.

ISO 100 • 1/20 sec. •  
f/2.8 • 90mm





## Chapter 4 Assignments

With a greater understanding of light, you will have much more control over the outcome of your images. Remember that light is the single most important element in your photographs. How you work with the light and your exposures directly relates to whether your images will look the way you visualize them.

### Quality and Quantity of Light

Find a subject close to your home that you can revisit over the course of several days at different times. Photograph the subject under different light conditions to see the effects light has on the mood and character of your subject. Shoot at sunrise, sunset, midday, twilight, and on an overcast day. Then compare the images to see the effects the light has on the subject. Review your exposures and study the EXIF data to see how your settings changed at different times of day based on the quantity of light.

### Direction of Light

Once again, you will need to stretch this assignment over a few days to be able to see the change in the direction of light. Select a few subjects that you can photograph from several angles so you can compare the direction of light and how it affects your subject. Begin with front lighting. Move around so the light is behind your subject and take another photograph. Then shoot your subject with the light coming from the side. Compare the results to see what effect the direction of light has on your subject.

### Exposure Compensation

If you have a bracket setting on your camera, you can use it for this assignment. With your camera mounted on a tripod, shoot a sequence of at least five photographs beginning with the metered value followed by a shot at minus 1 exposure compensation and then minus 2 exposure compensation. Then dial in plus 1 and plus 2, and shoot at each exposure setting. Compare the results to see the effect of darkening the image and adding drama or brightening the subject to make it feel brighter.

*Share your results with the book's Flickr group!*

*Join the group here: [flickr.com/groups/composition\\_fromsnapshotstogreatshots](https://www.flickr.com/groups/composition_fromsnapshotstogreatshots)*

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